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The Wizard of Oz Conventions

John C. Hulsman

Barack Obama und John McCain gelang es erst auf der Zielgeraden zur offiziellen Nominierung, die Unterstützung der Basis ihrer Parteien zu gewinnen. Obama konnte durch den öffentlichen Friedensschluss mit der Clinton-Familie und einer erstklassigen Rede auf dem Parteikonvent überzeugen. McCain überraschte mit der Vorstellung seiner Vizekandidatin: Sarah Palin ist das Idealbild einer sozialkonservativen Frau, die im Kampf gegen Korruption und Filz in Alaska ähnlich wie McCain den Ruf einer durchsetzungsstarken und bodenständigen Politikerin erworben hat. Bei den unabhängigen Wählern wird Palin hingegen kaum überzeugen. Und ihre außenpolitischen Qualifikationen lassen viele Wünsche offen.

Like the Tin Man, Lion, and Scarecrow from the glorious 1939 movie, both Barack Obama and John McCain began their conventions missing something vital. The standard playbook for American presidential elections is that candidates should move to the extremes (the left for the Democrats, the right for the Republicans) during the primaries, before gravitating toward the political center during the general election campaign, in the hopes of winning over the elusive independent voters who traditionally decide the contest.

That remains true insofar as it goes; but it leaves out one essential element. Such a strategy only works if the candidates have first secured their base. Just as the Tin Man needed a heart, the Lion courage, and the Scarecrow a brain, so Obama and McCain desperately need the full-throated support of their party regulars. For all their compelling qualities, neither Obama nor McCain had secured them before Denver and St. Paul. That is the desperately serious political struggle at work beneath the surface of the seemingly frivolous exercise of wearing funny hats and drinking too much at the conventions.

Obama does the job

Forests of trees have been felled trying to explain why Barack Obama—supremely gifted orator, political savant, serious intellectual—has been having so much trouble trying to finish off John McCain in what is undoubtedly a Democratic year. For the Bush years—characterized by the follies in Iraq, the chronic incompetence in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the mortgage/banking crisis—have taken their toll. President Bush's approval rating hovers around that of a used car salesman; he has received the lowest favorable presidential rating in the history of Gallup polling (which given Jimmy Carter is saying something). The Democrats should pick up at least 5 Senate seats and around 15 House seats in the coming election.

The disastrous leadership of President Bush has turned the public off the Republican brand in general. At the start of President Bush's first term party identification was about even; now voters identify themselves as Democrats over Republicans by over ten-percentage points. That is the headwind John McCain must face every day as battles against the odds.

So given Obama's undoubted gifts and that this is an once-in-a-lifetime Democratic year, why is he having so much trouble? Sadly, it all started with the speech in Berlin. Obama, speaking to an adoring multitude, looked as if he were running for chancellor; this is not a strategy designed to win over undecided blue-collar voters in Pennsylvania and Ohio.

To American eyes (though at the time I thought it a good move to dispel doubts about his foreign policy) it looked arrogant, as though Obama thought he was already President, that the election was merely a formality. The German press reaction, (Der Spiegel anointing him as '44,' the president-in-waiting, surely did not help) reinforced general American unease about the glowing and uncritical press coverage of the Illinois Senator. McCain mocked Obama, comparing him and the trip to the vacuous cult of American celebrity, to Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, people who are famous for being famous. It was a funny and very effective way to call Obama's experience into question. Correspondingly, in August Obama's small lead shrunk into nothing in the polls.

But his bigger problem was the unvarnished, if utterly misplaced, rage of the Clintonistas who came within a whisker of beating him for the Democratic nomination. Given the closeness of the contest, it is absolutely vital that Obama lure the almost half his party who supported Senator Clinton into voting for him. At the time of the convention, he had not. A disturbingly high percentage, a full quarter of Hillary supporters, indicated they were not convinced they would vote for their nominee; this was a catastrophe in the making.

On the face of it, their feelings of both entitlement and injury were annoyingly off base. Senator Clinton entered the contest the prohibitive favorite, ploughed through \$100 million without knowing exactly how the money was spent (not a good advertisement for running the American economy), and whose staff were as venomous (constantly leaking to the press against one another), as they were incompetent (so sure of victory, they neglected to organize for the post-Super Tuesday contests where Obama finished them off).

But in a way none of that matters. While there is no evidence of the mass sexism Hillary's injured supporters claim, Obama just had to win over the angry, including former President Clinton, whose personal sense of entitlement has never been his most attractive quality. Obama took a calculated risk in letting both Clintons speak on consecutive nights in Denver, as well as in letting Hillary's name be formally put in nomination. Both moves could have served to remind the public of what they liked least about the Democrats—the self-destructive instinct to be divisive and fractious, to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory.

But Obama rightly gambled on the discipline of Hillary Clinton and the narcissism of Bill Clinton. Both speeches, especially that of the former President, were well-received addresses testifying to Obama's virtues. They did so for typically Clintonian reasons. The former President was desperate to refurbish his image with the party regulars who have so loved him in the past, especially African-Americans.

If, as many around Senator Clinton peevishly mutter to the press, she really believes Obama will lose the election campaign, her best bet is to wholeheartedly support him, so she is not blamed in what would amount to an anguished post-mortem for the defeat. As such, she would be the prohibitive favorite to be the Democratic nominee in 2012. It is easy to forget that Senator Obama honed his political skills on the mean streets of Chicago. In being able to rightly discern the Clintons' motivations, his political savvy shone through.

Likewise, his decision to give his acceptance speech in a huge outdoor arena (complete with faux Greek columns) had disaster written all over it, as it again played into fears about both the hype around him, as well as the candidate's own grandiosity. But, somehow, by all accounts, it worked. Obama was more passionate than usual, more detailed in his economic plans, and, for the first time in a month, more on the attack. For the huge crowd of 80,000 (plus 38 million people at home), the speech went down a treat. Obama had survived his trial by fire in Denver.

To the victor...

Obama's immediate bounce in the wake of his successful convention was substantial; he gained around six percentage points from the exercise, about double what the hapless Kerry campaign managed in 2004. However, this lead proved ethereal, given the McCain campaign's exquisite timing in naming Sarah Palin the very next day as his running mate. But, far more important than this headline, Obama had fulfilled his Wizard of Oz mission; according to Gallup 81 percent of Clinton supporters are now likely to vote for him in November, up from 70 percent before the convention started. Indeed, Denver proved to be the Emerald City for Obama.

Oddly enough, John McCain faced a similar task in St. Paul. He had won the nomination largely because it was 'his turn,' he was the best-known face in a very weak Republican field. The party base, knowing McCain to be a maverick, also knew he was the only possible nominee with a ghost's chance to be elected in November, given his long-time strength with independent voters. Unlike the Democrats, with their death instinct in national elections, Republicans like to win, having held the presidency for twenty-eight of my forty-one years. In swallowing their feelings about McCain, the base did what it had to do.

But his maverick streak cuts both ways with the party regulars. The very reasons that independent voters like him—his stands on campaign finance reform, the need for a post-Kyoto protocol, standing up to the tobacco lobby, immigration reform, questioning the use of torture in the war on terror—are all positions that make standard issue Republicans cringe. Further, before this election cycle where he has been playing nice, McCain famously has not thought much of the social conservatives, accusing them of being 'agents of intolerance.' Social conservatives make up something like a quarter of the party; McCain has gone from being their declared enemy to agreeing to an uneasy truce. McCain won the nomination, but with precious little enthusiasm from the party base, which is an absolutely

necessary factor if he is to have any hope of upsetting Obama.

All this went out the window with McCain's shocking pick of Sarah Palin, the popular governor of Alaska, as his running mate. Many commentators have reached the mistaken conclusion that Palin was chosen to try to wrest Hillary supporters away from Obama. While a few may come over, it was never very likely that Hillary's left-wing friends would be tempted to vote for a social conservative. Rather, the very direct reason for the Palin pick was to get over McCain's own Wizard of Oz problem, as he needed to fire up a base badly dispirited by the primary campaign.

Say what you want about Palin (and later on I will), she has transformed the convention and injected badly needed enthusiasm into Republican ranks. A sign of this was that the McCain campaign raised \$10 million in the first forty-eight hours after his choice was known, an unheard-of amount for a man that has been financially outgunned by the Obama campaign.

The reason that Sarah Palin has so quickly become the darling of the party's social conservative base is that she is one of them. A lifetime member of the National Rifle Association (NRA), she has long said that one of her favorite hobbies is hunting moose. Ferociously against abortion in any circumstance, Palin recently gave birth to her fifth child, Trig, who was born with Down's syndrome. The Palin family had long known this, but did not hesitate to have the baby. That has made her a hero within the overwhelmingly pro-life party. For Palin does not just talk the talk, she has walked the walk, following her socially conservative principles through life's difficulties.

Further, McCain, ever the idiosyncratic campaigner, picked Palin because he liked her, a fact that stands in contrast to his famous animosity toward Mitt Romney, another finalist for the Vice-Presidential nomination. McCain sees Palin as a figure in his own maverick reforming image, having taken on Big Oil and the endemic corruption within her own Alaskan Republican Party. While only serving as governor for a little over a year

and a half, she has fought wasteful spending and put the state's budget, awash with oil money, into surplus.

Even better, she comes across as a human being. Having five children, a husband who works (at least part of the time) on an oil rig, being a former beauty pageant finalist (she was runner-up for Miss Alaska), starting her political career in the local parent-teachers group, and serving as a small-town mayor; these are all hallmarks of American middle-class life. Joe Biden, by contrast, the charming Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, has been in Washington for 36 years. While undoubtedly able, he shows it. Palin's everyday, middle-class, anti-Washington populism is a potent political weapon, as she showed during her acceptance speech.

So McCain, in choosing the entirely unknown Palin, has thunderously managed to solve his Wizard of Oz problem. The sullen Republican base of social conservatives will now campaign and vote for him with genuine enthusiasm.

But...

Saying all that, I think McCain's choice of Palin will prove disastrous. First, in moving so far to the right to placate the base, he will have real trouble in now winning over the independent voters, up to now a McCain specialty, that he must have to win the presidency. With independents against the Iraq war with an even greater fervor than the average American (three-quarters feel the war, despite the surge, has been an unmitigated disaster), it was always going to be difficult, given McCain's outspoken support for the Bush administration's Iraq policy, for him to win over this key constituency. Palin makes it almost impossible.

Second, choosing Palin blunts his very effective August message, when he crept close to Obama in the na-

tional polls. McCain's general argument went like this: 'Obama is a gifted man, and his nomination is truly historical, but we live in dangerous times and he is not experienced enough, especially regarding foreign affairs, to be President yet.' This was a telling and perfectly valid argument; with Palin's selection it is utterly ridiculous for him to continue making it.

For being commander of the Alaskan National Guard and having a son on his way to Iraq are pathetic arguments to make (as the Republican campaign is) as to Palin's foreign policy experience. Let us be frank; in terms of foreign policy qualifications, Palin is not ready to be my intern.

In picking Palin, McCain solved his political problems, but he did no favors to the country. For given his age (at 72 he would be the oldest first-term president), as well as the rigors he endured as a POW in Vietnam, his choice of a Vice-President was far from academic, as he has forthrightly admitted. Thrusting an untested novice onto the international stage, placing her one heartbeat away from the presidency, shows disastrous judgment. For I agree with John McCain; we do live in a dangerous world. It is no place for a beginner on foreign policy issues. McCain solved his Wizard of Oz problem; but he handed a larger one to the rest of us.



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